

# What the Heck Is Project-Based Learning?

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You know the hardest thing about teaching with project-based learning? Explaining it to someone. It seems to me that whenever I asked someone the definition of PBL, the description was always so complicated that my eyes would begin to glaze over immediately. So to help you in your own musings, I've devised an elevator speech to help you clearly see what's it all about.

## PBL: The Elevator Speech

An elevator speech is a brief, one- or two-sentence response you could give someone in the amount of time it takes to go from the first floor to the second floor in an apartment building. I like this visual, and I use it with my students because getting to the point and encapsulating the gist of something is vital in today's speaking- and writing-heavy world.

So the elevator opens up, a guy walks in and out of the blue asks you, "What the heck *is* project-based learning anyway?" I don't know why he would ask that, but for the purposes of this fantasy, it seems that any Joe-off-the-street is fascinated by your response.

You respond accordingly: "PBL is the act of learning through identifying a real-world problem and developing its solution. Kids show what they learn as they journey through the unit, not just at the end."

"That's it?" the guy asks.

"Well, no," you reply. "There's more to it than that, but this is your floor, and we're out of time." He gives you a brief nod of thanks and departs, leaving you to think of all the richness that this definition does not, in fact, impart.

After all, if we just look at that definition, it doesn't state certain trends in PBL.

## A More Elaborate Response

So now that it's just you (the reader) and me again, let's bump up that definition so that it more accurately captures the power of this learning strategy:

PBL is the ongoing act of learning about different subjects simultaneously. This is achieved by guiding students to identify, through research, a real-world problem (local to global) developing its solution using evidence to support the claim, and presenting the solution through a multimedia approach based in a set of 21st-century tools.

Kids show what they learn as they journey through the unit, interact with its lessons, collaborate with each other, and assess themselves and each other. They don't just take a test or produce a product at the end to show their learning.

You realize that this definition, while closer to accurate than the previous version, would have caused his eyes to glaze over (as yours may have just now), and you decide that the earlier definition is by far the more efficient version, even as it shortchanges the awesomeness of the strategy.

Because PBL is awesome when it is implemented by teachers who buy into its methods. It is exciting to teach using PBL, and your excitement, in turn, causes excitement in your clients, the students.

## PBL Creates a Learning Story

Nevertheless, it took me awhile to tease myself away from the daily drudgery of teaching with disconnected lessons. You know what I mean. I'm talking about the daily lessons that might teach a skill, and perhaps that skill fits within a unit based on a topic or a theme, but each lesson works independently and can function without being embraced in a unit that connects them all in a learning story.

But I grew bored, and I was concerned that my students would, too.

Teaching with PBL is the difference between the atmosphere at Disneyland and the atmosphere at a Six Flags resort. No offense to Six Flags, I love a great roller coaster, but their décor needs some serious work. At Disneyland, you are submerged in the story of each ride from the time you enter the line. The walls, the ceiling, the ground on which you tread as you advance to the actual ride, all support the end result.

Teaching with PBL is much the same way. It couches lessons in a tale -- a tale about a problem that must be solved or an activity that must be developed. The learning happens along the way towards the presentation of the solution.

After all, using PBL isn't about writing a state report. It's about using what you know about the state you study and then creating your own state. It isn't about building a replica of the Washington Monument. It's about researching someone to honor, designing your own monument, and persuasively pitching a committee to build it.

Project-based learning typically is grounded in the following elements:

- Role-playing
- Real-world scenarios
- Blended writing genres
- Multiple reading genres
- Authentic assessments
- Authentic audiences
- Real-world expertise brought into the classroom
- Units that assess multiple skills
- Units that require research and comprehension of multiple subjects
- Student choice
- Collaboration
- Multiple methods of communication (writing, oral speaking, visual presentations, publishing, etc.)

(Brief note here: Don't panic. You don't need every single one of these elements to call your unit PBL. These are elements to strive for, not to kill yourself to achieve.)

Allow me to personify for a moment: PBL cares about our mission to educate all. PBL never forgets that one of our main jobs is to prepare students for the predicted future. PBL knows that students are not standardized, they don't learn in a standardized way, and that our clientele can't be assessed in a standardized manner if we are looking to foster innovation. PBL keeps its eye on the ball no matter the trendy standard or curriculum package du jour.

PBL doesn't ask you to replace your content. It asks that you create a vehicle in which to communicate your content. If PBL is a play, then the math or science or history or writing -- or whatever you teach -- make up the scenes that propel each act toward the final curtain call.

The learning story that you and your students create together makes up the overall PBL unit. Be prepared, however. You'll plan and frontload tons, but once you jump in, you'll discover that when you hand over the writing of the learning story to your kids, they will take it far and above any book you've ever read.